

# The Impact of Violence on People with Learning Disabilities

Scottish

Learning Disabilities

Observatory

## Summary

We carried out research to explore people with learning disabilities' experiences of multiple forms of violence in Scotland and how this violence impacted on their health and wellbeing. We also investigated how police in Scotland responded to reports of violence and hate crimes made by people with learning disabilities.

## Why is this important?

People with learning disabilities are far more likely than those in the general population to experience violence and hate crime at all stages of their lives and face significant barriers to reporting violence. As a result, their experiences of violence often remain hidden.

## What did we do?

We held focus groups and interviews with people with learning disabilities to find out about their everyday experiences of violence. They shared information about the different kinds of violence, bullying and harassment they had been subjected to and how this affected their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.

We also asked members of Police Scotland how they responded to reports of violence made by people with learning disabilities and how they felt violence impacted on members of the learning disabilities community.

**Despite significant policy recognition of targeted violence and disability hate crime, we found that people with learning disabilities disproportionately experience all forms of violence at all stages of life.**



This includes childhood sexual violence, physical abuse, interpersonal and intimate partner violence, violence in long-stay hospitals and care, and financial abuse. All of the participants who spoke to us reported violence and harassment as children, young people and adults; for many, violence was ongoing.

The people we spoke to also reported that fear of violence and its effects had a huge impact on their mental wellbeing, leading to anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide attempts. Participants were sometimes afraid to leave their homes or would only leave with a support worker which meant that they did not feel able to live independent lives in the community.



“The evidence from the Observatory regarding people with learning disabilities’ experiences of hate crime has proved invaluable in our influencing and engagement on the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Bill. The research has allowed us to show the impact of hate crime experienced by people with learning disabilities in Scotland and to make the case for disaggregated data to ensure we are recording reported incidences of hate against people with learning disabilities, which was included in the bill.”

**Oonagh Brown**  
Human Rights Adviser, SCLD

Participants also reported that they were frequently not believed by support workers, family members and, crucially, police which made them feel isolated, lonely and scared.

### What happened next?

The research was published in the **Journal of Interpersonal Violence** in February 2021.

In November 2020, the research team collaborated with the Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities (SCLD) to provide written and oral evidence based on these findings to the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Bill.

In February 2021, following recommendations from SCLD which were underpinned by this evidence, it was confirmed that an agreement to provide disaggregated disability hate crime data (meaning they will specifically collect data on learning disability) will be included in the new legislation. This is significant as this information has not been collected/provided in Scotland before. The legislation was passed in April 2021.

SCLD has also worked with the Observatory to produce a film on people with learning disabilities experience of hate crime.

We will continue to work with people with learning disabilities alongside advocacy groups and third sector organisations and policy makers to raise awareness of the findings from this study. Meaningful societal and policy change is required, in line with equality and human rights legislation, so that people with learning disabilities can live autonomously and feel safe in their community without fear of violence.

This impact case study is based on research by Dr Phillippa Wiseman and Professor Nick Watson for the Scottish Learning Disabilities Observatory at the University of Glasgow. For more information about this research, please visit the SLDO website via <https://bit.ly/3ppxTtY>



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